

Overview

The Frontier Within: Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium

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1. Globalization

Globalization has progressed beyond the stage of being a "process." The markets and media of the world have become increasingly integrated, and people, goods, funds, information, and images are moving freely across national borders on a major scale. The fences between countries have become lower, and the effects of developments in one part of the world are immediately being felt elsewhere; the world is indeed becoming an ever smaller place. This trend will accelerate even further in the twenty-first century. As a result, the universality and utility of systems and standards in various fields, including the economy, science, and academic training, will be held up to global yardsticks for questioning and evaluation. Every country will have to review, reevaluate, and adjust its existing systems and practices on the basis of a global perspective. It will be an age of megacompetition in systems and standards. The effects will extend from politics and diplomacy to the economy, society, and everyday life; closed systems that are complete unto themselves within a single country will grow hollow and impoverished.

Globalization will accelerate the process of diversification, both domestically and internationally. It will present people with a variety of options and thereby work to increase vitality, but at the same time it will bring people into direct contact with foreign elements and thereby act as a source of friction and conflict.

Globalization has raised a variety of issues for Japan, such as the need to cope with the speed of developments, to participate in rule making and to empower individuals. Japan has relied on a time-consuming process of reaching consensus through the ringi system (under which a circular stating the proposed decision must be approved in turn by every affected department), rules have not been made explicit, and nonverbal communication

has been prized; in this context the locus of responsibility has been blurred, and the ideas and creativity of individuals have not been fully utilized.

These practices will put Japan at a disadvantage in the age to come. Japan needs to base its systems and rules on standards that are explicit and internationally acceptable. It will also be necessary to delineate accountability, make the decision-making process transparent and speedier, place greater value on the wisdom and ideas of the individual, and clarify individual authority and responsibility. We must develop a society that does not allow precedents, regulations, vested interests, and other obstacles to stand in the way of pioneering concepts and activities, a society in which people who fail can have chances to try again.

Some judge globalization to be no more than Americanization or to mean the unilateral imposition of American standards. It is true that the United States currently enjoys an overwhelming advantage in the multiple processes of globalization. But even the United States must confront the spreading backlash and resentment resulting from the widening of income gaps, both domestically and globally, and the rise of anti-American sentiment. If drives against globalization and protectionist moves arise at home and abroad, it will become difficult to reach agreement on international rules. Japan should take careful note of the negative elements of globalization, but at the same time it should make full use of the positive elements. Our country should also participate more actively in the formation of global systems and standards and the making of rules.